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REGION

HOME

NEWS +

News Home

Story Index

Obituaries

Police Beat

Business

Columnists

Environment

Government

Naval Academy

Region

Schools

Weather

Archives

COMMUNITIES +

SPORTS +

OPINION +

MULTIMEDIA +

BUSINESS +

ENTERTAINMENT +

LIFESTYLE +

SITE SERVICES +

THE CAPITAL +

ARCHIVES

CALENDAR

CARS

CLASSIFIEDS

JOBS

LOCAL DIRECTORY

SITE MAP

Front Page



Correction 'historian' knows prison's past

Published April 15, 2008

BALTIMORE (AP) - The prisoners who've spent countless nights at the former Maryland Penitentiary are still alive in Andrew Stritch's mind as he recalls their stories and his own tales of helping them find redemption over the last 40 years.

Mr. Stritch has created a mini-museum at the dark gray structure reminiscent of a castle in downtown Baltimore where he has worked since Aug. 23, 1967. Prison records say he started March 21, 1968, but the 66-year-old is too devoted to the job to forget that kind of detail.

"You can't fake caring about a job like this," Mr. Stritch said.

That devotion is how the state correction department's longest-serving civilian worker keeps going at America's oldest prison still in operation.

The prison has the words "State Penitentiary" etched above the stone entrance. The face of its first prisoner - "Negro Bob" - is carved in one pillar opposite a likeness of the longest-serving warden, John F. Weyler from the 1890s.

Mr. Stritch is a historian - albeit unofficially - for the penitentiary and knows the history and stories throughout all 15 acres of the prison built in 1811.

He also helped research a book, "A Monument to Good Intentions" by Wallace Shugg, about the place. Mr. Shugg wrote Mr. Stritch was his "eyes and ears inside 'the Castle,'" while providing old inmate photographs and other historic artifacts.

The stories Mr. Stritch can't forget are people like Smokestack Smitty, christened with that nickname after Robert Smith climbed a power house chimney in a 1957 protest. When he came down, he'd earned a new name and a place in Mr. Stritch's history.

Another memory is that of Floyd Alexander, an inmate who in 1981 lay screaming every night while trying to sleep or rest in a cell near Mr. Stritch's office. Mr. Stritch found an outside doctor to examine Alexander. The doctor found a hairline hip fracture and gave Alexander the medicine he needed.

Every time Alexander saw Mr. Stritch after that, they spoke. Sometimes, other inmates would thank him for that and greet him on the bus or the streets of Baltimore after they were released from prison.

Teleacia Jones, a volunteer services coordinator who has known Mr. Stritch for five



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years, isn't surprised to learn he forms good relationships with prisoners. She described him as an understated, compassionate man.

"He is a people person," Ms. Jones said. "He can talk to anyone."

In 1965, he began as a Division of Parole and Probation employee at 23 years old. From there, the only child from South Baltimore started learning more about how to be a transition specialist and help ex-offenders find work and have an easier transition out of prison and into the region.

He helps more than 1,700 inmates at what is now the Maryland Transition Center to find drug and alcohol addiction treatment as well as jobs and counseling, if they need it.

He's just as interested in his unofficial role as the prison's tour guide - whether it's chattily describing the female prisoners' area built in 1870, which is C-block now, or pointing out a large notch in the stone several stories up on the outside of the prison yard wall.

That notch is where prison officials installed a wooden walkway for hangings. After that, they installed a gas chamber inside the hospital. Now, Mr. Stritch says they've covered it with a curtain because it's built into the building. The lethal injection room is also inside the hospital, where it's been used since 1994.

Outside, Mr. Stritch points out creative brickwork that uses light shafts rather than windows to increase security and steam tunnels that hinder renovations in the facility's basement. In that area, Mr. Stritch says he's found rusted padlocks and a well-aged, metal bowl he keeps at his office, which he uses as the museum when giving tours to college students.

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